

Unintentional Hermits/ Animal Cities- The Bubble Dancer

by verity healey

Gaston could remember the first time he set eyes on Deno. He'd gone into the back of the house to enquire after a lost order and found himself face to face with the dish washer, a man in his late 20s, dual heritage, tall, staring eyes and dangling useless hands. The hands annoyed Gaston right off. They didn't suit his French sense of aesthetic. To Gaston they seemed huge, gormless and he couldn't understand them. In fact he couldn't understand why the proprietor, Mr Heritage, had hired someone like Deno- the Delico where they worked was mentioned in the same breath as The Ivy and its guests were just as famous. Everyone who worked there, even the Commis, acquired a sense of decorum and discretion. But when Gaston looked at Deno he had a premonition of a thousand china plates shattering into little pieces and that shouldn't be so with a dish washer. They had to be light and delicate with their hands. He thought to himself, This won't do, it won't do at all.

'Have you seen the new Bubble Dancer?' whispered Katia, one of the waitresses. 'He is well buried!'

Gaston allowed himself a slight incline of the head to show that he had heard. As Head Waiter he didn't encourage back chat, especially front of house, but those huge hands of Deno's still annoyed Gaston. He hated clumsiness and to him, the shape of Deno's hands, rounded and with fingers stuck in the flesh like stray sticks in sand, meant stupidity and dullness. And stupid Deno proved to be, he was slow in his job as a dish washer and as Katia said, well buried, so that the Commis, already muttering and grumbling under the strain of their

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apprenticeships, found themselves running to the racks to grab dripping wet plates and cutlery. What's more Deno didn't seem to notice. The more he was shouted at to hurry up the more he smiled and slowed down and the more he dropped plates. In the end after a month Gaston was nominated spokesperson and petitioned to go to Mr Heritage to complain. Everyone, from the Chef De Cuisine down to the Commis had had enough.

The truth was that Gaston himself was now more than a little irritated by Deno, for some reason the man seemed to have taken a little shine to him.

It happened after the cat incident. One day they were sharing a fag break at the back, both of them standing there and saying nothing seeing as Deno never spoke, when a car veered fast around the corner at the same time as a Ginger Tom dashed into the road. The car simply ran over it and the cat was left a poor mangled thing squashed on the tar mac. At this Deno let out a little howl, threw down his cigarette and flung himself in front of it, stroking its crushed skull. Gaston stood astonished, it was the first time he'd seen Deno express any emotion and over a cat too!

The man's an imbecile, thought Gaston. It's only a cat and not even his.

He watched Deno bending over the mog as if a priest giving last rites.

'Come on Deno,' he said uneasily. 'It's only a cat.'

But Deno seemed deaf as well as stupid. As Gaston moved closer he saw the cat's brilliant yellow eyes fastened on Deno's and Deno had tears slipping down his cheeks.

'Come on Deno!' said Gaston again.

He looked at the big man hulking over the cat and was instantly moved and resented it.

'It's only a cat, please!' he insisted, his voice harder.

But Deno frantically rubbed the animal's heaving chest as it breathed its last in the hot sunlight. Deno was silent, crouching over the still body.

'It's gone Gaston,' Deno said finally. Gone.

Gaston looked at his watch and tapped Deno on the shoulder.

'Break's over OK?' he said.

Deno raised a watery face to Gaston, the cat a bloody heap in his arms.

'Please Gaston,' he pleaded, 'Don't make me go back in there now. You're the head waiter, talk to Chef please! I can't go back in there like this!'

Gaston opened his mouth intending to remonstrate but something in Deno's face stopped him. His eyes were soft and brown and pleading, like a dog's. Even his hands, cradling the ginger mess, had found a use.

'Well,' began Gaston awkwardly, 'It's nearly the end of your shift anyway, why don't you go home?'

Gaston felt it would be better for everyone, and anyway, he was irritated by Deno's cries.

Deno though suspected nothing and through his tear streaked face broke into a smile as he stared up at Gaston. Gaston took a step

back- he felt like a cat's rough tongue had licked him all over and turned hurriedly away.

After this incident Deno seemed to hang around Gaston a lot. He appeared to attach significance to the cat incident and behaved- at least this was how Gaston saw it- as though he were his special friend. When Gaston came into work Deno always raised his hand and smiled and called out. At breaks he often found himself smoking with Deno alone, at meal times Deno always sat with Gaston, even if other tables were free. Gaston might not have minded so much except that he found Deno's peaceful silence irritating. Gaston, in spite of his restrained manner, was really raucous at heart and enjoyed a good laugh as much as anyone. He also loved to ruminate over the day's newspapers but he doubted Deno could even read.

'You like silence don't you Deno?' he said to him once.

'Yes Gaston,' Deno had replied, promptly staring off into the distance.

The staring into the distance annoyed Gaston. What's he looking at now? he thought.

'And what about cats, do you like cats?' he asked.

'Like all creatures, they are beautiful!' answered Deno, smiling and lapsing into silence.

What a bore! thought Gaston.

But Deno turned to Gaston suddenly and bore his eyes into him. Was it his imagine or did Deno's eyes turn yellow like a cat's? Gaston thought.

'But you're not happy are you?' said Deno strangely. 'I can see it in your body. You are not happy in your body. Perhaps you are repressing something?'

Gaston was momentarily surprised. He hadn't really credited Deno with that much insight, he just saw him as a silent fool. He looked him over, this huge shapeless mass seemingly unsculptured and unformed. Yet in spite of this he found himself wanting to confide in Deno a little. It wasn't that he was looking for Deno's advice he told himself. No rather, he found Deno a convenient wall for him to talk to, to hear the sound of his own voice pleasantly reverberated back to him. In fact Gaston had started to feel a little flattered by Deno's attention. He enjoyed the dog like way he looked up at him, the way he always appeared at his feet and with his tongue hanging out, he liked the adoration. And sometimes he would return Deno's long looks by gazing searchingly into Deno's own eyes. But if anyone ever said he was leading him on, he would deny it of course. He was simply reciprocating Deno's friendship.

Sometimes, just to jest, Gaston would side with the Katia and the others in poking fun at Deno. He would laugh at his plate breaking, join in with the shouting at him, curse him under his breath. He felt sometimes a little guilty at this but would push the feeling the away, even though Deno would look at him with his lost brown eyes.

One night Deno asked Gaston to go out with him.

Simpleton, thought Gaston.

Gaston had just shouted at Deno for breaking a load of plates and then had laughed with the others at Deno's stupid ways. Surely he knows? thought Gaston. Surely he knows now really what I think of him, yet he's wanting to hang out with me? Such an idiot.

Gaston was perplexed and angry at Deno's niceness.

That evening Gaston did go out with Deno though. He didn't want to go home, the evening was pleasant and promising summer, the pubs were full, he thought lazily it might be fun to have a beer and listen to the sound of his own voice rambling at Deno. They set off down the road from the restaurant together, Gaston nervously lighting a spliff. He hoped that Deno would lead him to a pub soon, his throat needed a beer. But Deno struck off suddenly down a little street that led along the backs of theatres and TV studios and headed for a path by the river.

'Where are we going Deno?' he asked.

'Isn't it nice?' said Deno, spreading his wide hands over the river and the sky.

Gaston was silent, he didn't care for the river and he was thinking more and more about a cold beer.

'I was just thinking about a bar,' Gaston said.

'A bar?' repeated Deno, giving Gaston a puzzled look. 'I don't know about bars, I just like to walk after the end of my shift.'

Gaston shrugged. He'd give it a few more minutes and then make his excuses. He knew this would be a mistake. Shucks, didn't he have other friends? What was he thinking of?

'What do you want to do Deno?' asked Gaston for something to say.

'Do? What, now?' Deno did not understand.

'No, I mean with your life! What are your ambitions?'

Deno stopped, looking perplexed.

'Gaston,' he said slowly, 'I am doing everything that I want to do with my life.'

'But you can't be!' replied Gaston amazed. 'No one can want to be a Bubble Dancer and not forever! I mean you must want to progress, may be become a Commi or something?'

'No, Gaston, no. I am fine.'

Now it was Gaston's turn to be confused. He stood and looked at Deno.

'But the work is awful and the pay shit,' he said at last. 'And everyone laughs at you,' he added to be spiteful.

'Really,' replied Deno, 'Don't you mean that about your job?'

They had come to the end of a pier and the sun was setting. Deno looked into the water.

'I think you are the one who's dissatisfied Gaston,' Deno said. 'I think there is something else in your heart. And when you find it, then you will be free.'

Gaston spluttered and held his hand to his mouth. How dare he, he thought. Rage tore in him. But then he frowned. ..wasn't he happy in his job? He thought he was. He vaguely remembered the uneasy niggling thoughts that kept him awake at night, the empty canvas boards in his room he hadn't touched for months, the career development loan he'd saddled himself with and all for what? For him to forget it because it was too hard. That secret inside room he possessed he had locked the door on forever. He looked at Deno's smiling face and saw it as a smirk. He was angry. How dare he remind him of this!

'You're an interfering busybody!' he said suddenly. 'There's nothing wrong with me! Fuck off!'

And Gaston had turned around and walked away. That night he tossed and turned as he tried to sleep, planning how he might end Deno's friendship and even get rid of him. His presence was an unhappy reminder of something.

The next day the answer was provided. Katia along with the Commis Chefs met him and demanded a strong complaint be made. Not only was Deno slow and breaking too much crockery, he was also troubling the waitresses, and asking strange questions about their state of happiness. Gaston was asked to make the formal complaint to Mr Heritage and he saw nothing wrong with it. Yes, he had been a sort of friend to Deno, he reflected. But it was only because he felt he was humoring him, nothing more. He felt sorry and frustrated by him actually. And Delico didn't need that kind of person.

'He is sweet of course!' said Gaston lamely when Mr Heritage looked at him in a certain way in his office. 'But I was just being friendly, we all were. He just doesn't fit in you know? He's just not the right kind of person...'

Later Deno was seen entering Mr Heritage's office and then leaving to go straight to the staff room, although on the way he stopped to argue with Katia about something. But he left immediately, casual workers on zero hour contracts didn't have any rights.

Deno thought hard as he walked up the street.

It was all about failure, he reflected. He was a failure because he couldn't hold down the simplest of jobs or make friends like the everyone else could, whilst the others were successful. And they knew it. Revelled in it.

The thought didn't occur to him he might not want to be successful at the same things as they were.

He managed to find a safe place- it was always this, a tree in the sun. He could rest his head against the bark and feel better. He could let go of his thoughts- they plagued his mind too much. Others would be surprised. Probably. He knew he didn't look much or like a lot went on in him.

There was one thing. He wished Gaston were with him now. He couldn't let go of that. Even though he knew that it was him who had complained in the end. He remembered Katia's face when he was defending Gaston over something when he was leaving and the way she had looked at him and said

'Well, you know who it was who complained to Mr Heritage about you don't you?'

He remembered that look with pain. He didn't know why she wanted to look like that, why she wanted to give him the news in that way, what it was she got out of it. That's the way the world is, thought Deno. That's just how people are. All the same, he felt a stab of loneliness in the blaring sun, despite the birds, despite or because of the laughing families around him. He still wished Gaston were there. Yet he knew, if he were, he would laugh at all of this and not understand. He'd laugh with his rosy cheeks and mouth full of scotch egg and fling his arms out and feel alive. He wouldn't feel sad with it. He wouldn't understand the depths of loneliness one can gauge from the tone of a tree's shadow. He'd just say

'What's wrong Deno? Eh? Depressed again? How boring. Just boring. Be careful you don't end up like bag man on the corner drinking his Special Brew.'

Everyone thought things were easy thought Deno. But to him it didn't seem this. It seemed a mixture of blind faith and dashed hope. The reality was the dashed hope.

